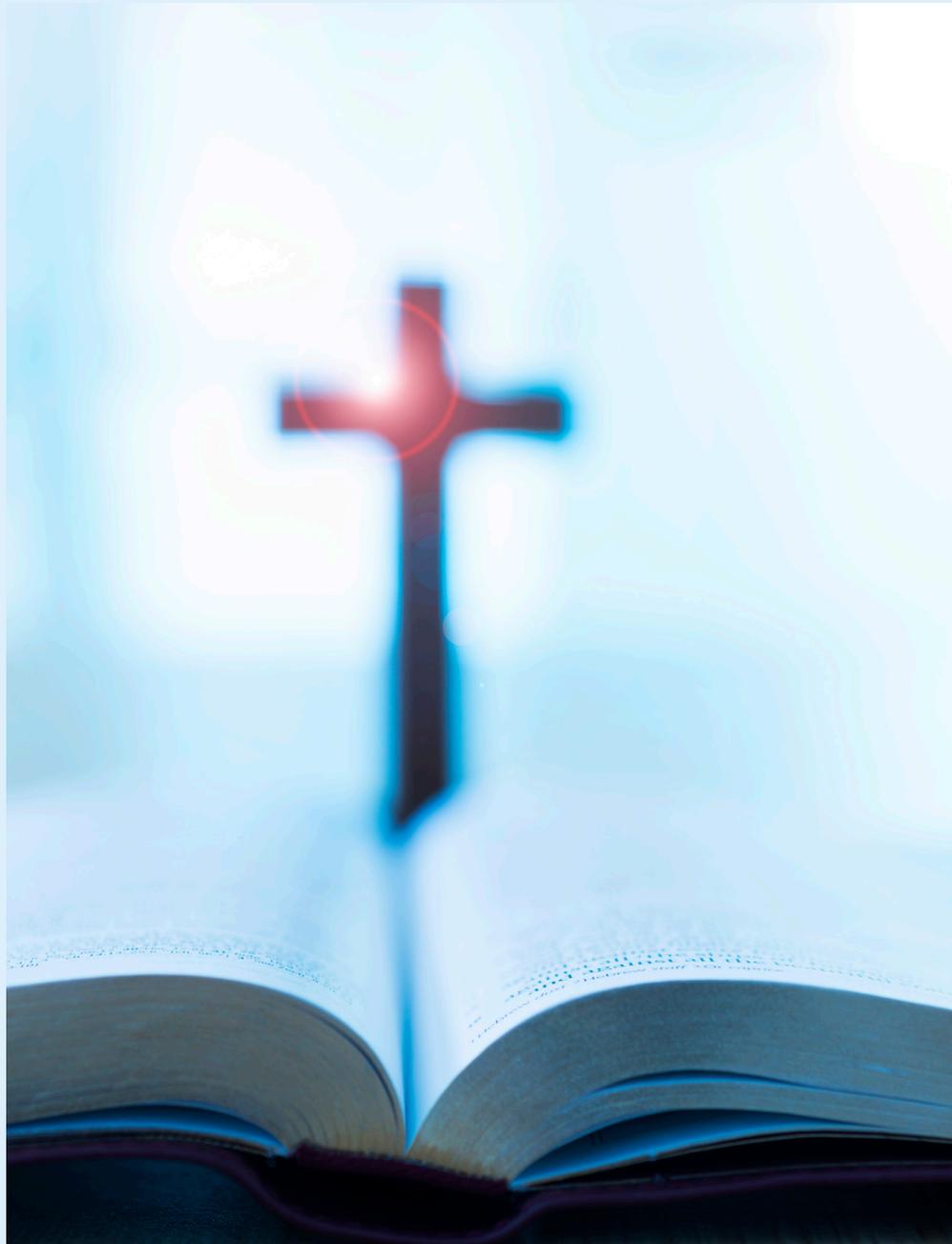


Bringing Matthew 25 Into Focus



Office of Theology and Worship



Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
Presbyterian Mission

Bringing Matthew 25 Into Focus

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Who is Bringing Matthew 25 Into Focus for?

Bringing Matthew 25 Into Focus explores a specific question: Are the three foci of the Matthew 25 Vision grounded in Matthew 25:31–46? That question has regularly been asked as people become familiar with the Matthew 25 Vision and its three foci. If you are not yet familiar with the Vision and its foci, you will find resources that do an excellent job of introducing this movement at presbyterianmission.org/ministries/matthew-25.

You will find a guide for reading, reflection and discussion of this study on pages 9 and 10.

Introduction

In 2016, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) committed this denomination to being a Matthew 25 church — a church living in the ways called for by Matthew 25, especially by the last part of that chapter (verses 31–46). In 2018, the General Assembly approved a plan to put that commitment into action. That plan is the Matthew 25 Vision. The Vision has three foci: building congregational vitality, dismantling structural racism and eradicating systemic poverty. Hundreds of congregations and many presbyteries, synods and other organizations have joined the Matthew 25 Vision in commitment to addressing these three foci.

As PC(USA) Presbyterians have learned about the Matthew 25 Vision, they have had questions. Some of those questions have a common core, a question that has repeatedly been raised: Are the three foci of the Matthew 25 Vision truly grounded in the text of Matthew 25:31–46? This specific question is rooted in a deeper, more general question: How are we to shape our life together in ways that are faithful to the guidance of Scripture? What follows seeks answers to these questions. The search begins with a reminder that we in the PC(USA) have committed ourselves to be grounded in and guided by Scripture. That commitment is based on an affirmation that God guides us through Scripture. The question is how to hear that guidance. Following that, we will explore the specific question about the relationship of Matthew 25:31–46 to the three foci of the Matthew 25 Vision. Then we will explore the deeper, more general question.

Starting point: What we seek in Scripture

We have committed to living in ways that are faithful to the guidance of Scripture. We make that clear in the “Foundations of Presbyterian Polity” section of our *Book of Order*:

Christ gives to the Church its faith and life, its unity and mission, its order and discipline. Scripture teaches us of Christ’s will for the Church, which is to be obeyed. In the worship and service of God and the government of the church, matters are to be ordered according to the Word by reason and sound judgment, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. (Subsection F-1.0203, which is titled “*Christ Gives the Church Its Life.*”)¹

What we seek in Scripture is guidance in knowing Jesus Christ’s will for the church, which is part of God’s good purposes for all Creation. The Matthew 25 Vision takes seriously the imperative to read Scripture in order to know Christ’s will and God’s purposes.

Are the three foci of the Matthew 25 Vision truly grounded in the text of Matthew 25?

Matthew 25:31–46 presents a vision of “the Son of Man” (Jesus Christ) arriving for the final judgment of “all the nations.” The nations (and thus the members of those nations) are judged on the basis of their care — or lack of care — for “the least of these who are members of my family” (:40, see also :45). In the vision, Jesus names six specific forms of care that were enacted or neglected:

- I was hungry and you gave me food;
- I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink;
- I was a stranger and you welcomed me;
- I was naked and you gave me clothing;
- I was sick and you took care of me;
- I was in prison and you visited me. (:35–6, 37–9, 42–4 with a variation)

Those who do these things, and do them without ulterior motive, are judged to be blessed by God, inheritors of “the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (:34). Those who do not do these things are judged to be “accursed,” and are “sent into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (:41). Six named needs: hungry, thirsty, identified as an outsider, naked, sick, imprisoned. Six named responses: given food, and drink, welcomed into the community, given clothing, cared for while sick, visited when imprisoned.²

The first question to ask about this list: Is it complete? Does this list tell us every need God calls people to meet? Or, does God recognize other, similar needs, and call people to meet them as well?

Is this list complete? A test case: Jesus' ministry

Are these six forms of need and the responses to them the full list? Does God judge us only on whether we are doing these six things? Or, is the list illustrative, giving a set of examples that will help us identify the kinds of things we are to be doing? Does God call us to other ways of caring for “the least of these who are members of my family”?

In order to answer that question, we can look at the Gospel of Matthew itself. What does Jesus do, and what does he tell his disciples to do?

In the early chapters of Matthew, Jesus does a lot of healing, and also a lot of teaching and proclaiming, and he calls together a group of disciples who learn from and alongside Jesus.

In Matthew 10, Jesus sends his disciples on mission. In verses 7–8, he instructs them on what they are to do: “As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.” Curing the sick and cleansing the lepers clearly match “I was sick and you cared for me.” Perhaps casting out demons also falls in the same category — demon possession as described in the Bible looks very much like mental illness. If death is the ultimate sickness and being raised from it a form of care for the sick, then “raise the dead” could be understood as an example of care for the sick. When Jesus instructed his disciples on how to join in his mission in the world, he seems to have skipped over five of the six standards of judgment in Matthew 25:31–46.

In the next chapter, Matthew 11, John the Baptist is in prison and is trying to understand who Jesus is. He sends his disciples to visit Jesus, to ask Jesus directly: “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” (11:3). Jesus responds with a description of his ministry: “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them” (11:4b–5). Sight restored to those suffering blindness, ability to walk restored to those unable to walk, those with leprosy cleansed, hearing given to those suffering deafness, the dead raised again to life — as before, all examples of care for the sick. The other five standards of judgment are skipped over, and another mission has been added: proclaiming good news to the poor.

In Matthew 15:30–31, the narrator reports on Jesus' ministry: “Great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the maimed, the blind, the mute, and many others. They put them at his feet, and he cured them, so that the crowd was amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the maimed whole, the lame walking, and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel.” Here again there is much care for the sick, and the other five forms of need named at the judgment are absent.

In other places in Matthew, some of those five other forms of need are addressed. Twice we are told of Jesus feeding crowds who are hungry after having spent the day listening to him (Matthew 14:13–21; 15:32–38). Jesus heals two men in “the country of the Gadarenes” who are suffering from demon possession that has left them alien to society (8:28–34). In this way, he welcomes strangers. But others of the six needs named in the vision of final judgement seem not to be part of Jesus' way of life. We have no record of Jesus visiting those who are in prison, for example. The words used for the six areas of need (hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick, in prison) are remarkable for how little they appear in the rest of the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus' ministry, and the ministry of his disciples, is spent doing many things that do not appear in the list of six.

Are the six forms of need and the responses to them given in Matthew 25:31–46 the full list of needs God calls us to meet? Does God judge us only on whether we are doing these six things? The answer is “no.” The list of six provides a set of examples of the kinds of things God calls us to be doing. The list is open-ended. What is clear in each case is that

1. For those in our denomination who are ordained as teaching elders, ruling elders or deacons, this commitment is made clear in the ordination questions: “Will you fulfill your ministry in obedience to Jesus Christ, under the authority of Scripture, and be continually guided by our confessions?” (W-4.0404d, the fourth ordination question asked of all those who are ordained; related to it is the second ordination question, found at W-4.0404b.)
2. Bible studies exploring these verses can be found here: presbyterianmission.org/ministries/matthew-25/matt-25-resources. See especially the study “God with Us in Jesus: A Matthew 25 Bible Study,” released at the same time as this paper.

there is a deep human need that is experienced by those who can be described as “the least of these.”³ God’s call is for the nations, and their members, to care for those experiencing these deep human needs, as experienced with unique acuteness by “the least of these,” who do not have resources or capacities necessary to overcome these deep needs by themselves.

Then how are we to live in ways faithful to the guidance offered to us in Matthew 25:31–46?

How are we to live in ways that are faithful to the guidance offered to us in Matthew 25:31–46 when the list of six needs and responses to those needs does not tell us everything we are to do? The last phrase in the subsection of the Foundations of Presbyterian Polity quoted earlier points the way: “according to the Word by reason and sound judgment, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.” As we seek to live in ways that are faithful to the guidance given to us in these verses from Matthew, we have to exercise discernment, praying for and seeking out the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Because we are not limited to the six needs and responses listed in Matthew 25:31–46, we have to consider who are “the least of these” and the deep needs they face in our present moment and context. And we must do so with an awareness of what it is that creates those needs.

That is fine for us, because exercising discernment as we seek to be guided by Scripture is something we Presbyterians have long been committed to doing. The Confession of 1967, in the first part of our Constitution (the Book of Confessions) puts it this way: “In each time and place there are particular problems and crises through which God calls the church to act. The church, guided by the Spirit, humbled by its own complicity and instructed by all attainable knowledge, seeks to discern the will of God and learn how to obey in these concrete situations.” And then the Confession moves to the logical next step: “The following are particularly urgent at the present time” (Book of Confessions, 9.43).



The commitment to exercising discernment as we seek to be guided by Scripture was not first established in 1967. Across our Presbyterian tradition we have, at our best, been clear that being guided by Scripture requires discernment, the application of reasoned reflection on Scripture and the specifics of the situations in which we find ourselves. The Westminster Confession, written in the 17th century and so central in shaping our Presbyterian tradition, affirms this commitment:

The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be

deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. Nevertheless we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word; and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed. (6.006)

Matthew 25:31–46 sets down a general rule: Those in deep human need are to be cared for. How those needs are specifically identified, and what form that care takes, is to be determined by the use of “prudence,” and “prudence” is one element of careful, faithful discernment.

3. Who describes them in this way is not stated. Clearly Jesus does not view them as the least. The implication is that “the least of these” are labeled that way by other people. The label expresses their judgment of those experiencing deep human need. Matthew 25:31–46 asks us to be clear whose judgment is better and more reliable: the judgment of the “Son of Man/shepherd/king.”

What do we learn when we apply discernment to find guidance in Matthew 25:31–46?

So, Matthew 25:31–46 gives us a list of six forms of deep human need and offers us God’s word on how we are to respond to the people who are experiencing those needs. This list does not include every deep human need. The list indicates the kinds of things God calls us to be doing, and it identifies who we are to be in relationship with as we address those needs. That means we have to exercise discernment in identifying the deep human needs of those who are “the least of these (who are members of my family)” today.

Fortunately, we (in the PC[USA]) have been exercising that discernment for a long time. One place where we have articulated our discernment is in our confession of faith. We have discerned a call to respond to deep need among “the least of these who are members of my family” by responding to structural racism and systemic poverty, and by nurturing vital congregations.

Our confession of faith is clear: Racism is sin and is to be rooted out and brought to an end.⁴ The quote from the Confession of 1967 above, regarding the need to “discern the will of God and learn how to obey in these concrete situations,” is followed immediately by identifying racism as sin that is to be dismantled:

God has created the peoples of the earth to be one universal family. In his reconciling love, God overcomes the barriers between sisters and brothers and breaks down every form of discrimination based on racial or ethnic difference, real or imaginary. The church is called to bring all people to receive and uphold one another as persons in all relationships of life: in employment, housing, education, leisure, marriage, family, church, and the exercise of political rights. Therefore, the church labors for the abolition of all racial discrimination and ministers to those injured by it. Congregations, individuals, or groups of Christians who exclude, dominate, or patronize others, however subtly, resist the Spirit of God and bring contempt on the faith they profess. (9.44)⁵

“The church is called to bring all people to receive and uphold one another in all relationships of life: in employment, housing, education, leisure, marriage, family, church, and the exercise of political rights.”⁶ In this way we name structural realities across parts of life in and through which some have been treated as if they were less, the least. For decades we have acknowledged, if not in such few words or with such directness, God’s call to dismantle structural racism.

Our confession of faith is clear: God commands the eradication of patterns of social organization that work to keep in poverty those experiencing poverty. Shortly after naming racism as sin, the confession stakes its claim on us in the face of poverty:

The reconciliation of humankind through Jesus Christ makes it plain that enslaving poverty in a world of abundance is an intolerable violation of God’s good creation. Because Jesus identified himself with the needy and exploited, the cause of the world’s poor is the cause of his disciples. The church cannot condone poverty, whether it is the product of unjust social structures, exploitation of the defenseless, lack of national resources, absence of technological understanding, or rapid expansion of populations. . . . A church that is indifferent to poverty, or evades responsibility in economic affairs, or is open to one social class only, or expects gratitude for its beneficence makes a mockery of reconciliation and offers no acceptable worship to God. (9.46)

Our confession of faith is clear: We are called by God to address the deep needs we face not only as individuals but also as a gathered people who are brought together to be present to the God who calls us to this work and who brings us together to strengthen and equip us for the work.

4. We have built on the clarity of our confession on this matter in additional documents, among them the statement of our most recent General Assembly, “On the Church in This Moment in History — Responding to the Sin of Racism and a Call to Action.”

5. Quoting the inclusive language version of the Confession of 1967, which was called for by the General Assembly at its 214th meeting in 2002. The same version is used in the quotations below.

6. The Confession of Belhar is built on the affirmation that racism is sin, and it speaks with particular clarity about divisions in the church that separate parts of the church on the basis of race.

The church gathers to praise God, to hear God’s word for humankind, to baptize and to join in the Lord’s Supper, to pray for and present the world to God in worship, to enjoy fellowship, to receive instruction, strength, and comfort, to order and organize its own corporate life, to be tested, renewed, and reformed, and to speak and act in the world’s affairs as may be appropriate to the needs of the time. The church disperses to serve God wherever its members are, at work or play, in private or in the life of society. (9.36–.37)

Congregational vitality stands in a symbiotic relationship with dismantling structural racism and eradicating systemic poverty. Building congregational vitality strengthens congregations and their members for taking up the hard work of eliminating structural racism and systemic poverty. And that work spirals back: Taking up the hard work of eliminating structural racism and systemic poverty has the power to strengthen congregational vitality.

The Matthew 25 Vision brings the guidance of Matthew 25:31–46 into focus for our present moment

As PC(USA) Presbyterians have learned about the Matthew 25 Vision and its three foci, they have asked questions. This is right and good. And in its own way very presbyterian! Among the questions they have asked is “Are the three foci of the Matthew 25 Vision truly grounded in the text of Matthew 25:31–46?” This question grows out of our deep commitment to be guided by the Word of God, and specifically the Word of God written, the Bible.⁷ Our commitment to be guided by Scripture requires us to exercise discernment, paying close attention to what Scripture says and what it does not say.

Matthew 25:31–46 offers a vision of God’s final judgment. In that judgment, the nations are judged by their responsiveness (or lack thereof) to the deep needs being experienced within those nations. Especially the needs of those who are considered the least, which is a judgment rendered by those who are not God. Matthew 25:31–46 identifies six specific forms of need, and the appropriate response to each one. These six are illustrations and are not a closed list of every need we are to see and work to overcome. Focusing Matthew 25:31–46 in our present moment requires us to discern, calling on the help of the Holy Spirit, what deep needs are being experienced by those among us who are treated as the least.

We in the PC(USA) have long practiced such discernment. The three foci of the Matthew 25 Vision are expressions of what we have discerned to be deep needs today that God sees, works to overcome, and calls us to join in seeing and overcoming. The three foci of the Matthew 25 Vision are rooted in and responsive to the guidance given to us in Matthew 25:31–46. May we join in God’s work of overcoming, seeing these needs and responding to them.

7. In its section on the Bible, the Confession of 1967 says this: “The one sufficient revelation of God is Jesus Christ, *the Word of God incarnate*, to whom the Holy Spirit bears unique and authoritative witness through the Holy Scriptures, which are received and obeyed as the *word of God written*.” (9.27 – italics added)

Bringing Matthew 25 Into Focus

A Guide for Reading, Reflection and Discussion

Who is *Bringing Matthew 25 Into Focus* for?

Bringing Matthew 25 Into Focus explores a specific question: *Are the three foci of the Matthew 25 Vision grounded in Matthew 25:31–46? That question has regularly been asked as people become familiar with the Matthew 25 Vision and its three foci. If you are not yet familiar with the Vision and its foci, you will find resources that do an excellent job of introducing this movement at presbyterianmission.org/ministries/matthew-25.*

How to engage *Bringing Matthew 25 Into Focus*

This guide offers a way for individuals or groups to engage *Bringing Matthew 25 Into Focus*.

Bringing Matthew 25 Into Focus is a reflection on a key question about the Matthew 25 Vision and its three foci (building congregational vitality, dismantling structural racism and eradicating systemic poverty). It responds to a question regularly asked about the Matthew 25 Vision and its three foci: **“Are the three foci of the Matthew 25 Vision truly grounded in the text of Matthew 25:31–46?”**

This question can best be answered by recognizing that it contains a series of questions. *Bringing Matthew 25 Into Focus* is built around this series of questions. The best way to engage it is to recognize and explore these questions. This guide lists the series of questions, inviting reflection on each one by identifying a reading from *Bringing Matthew 25 Into Focus*, followed by questions that encourage exploration of each question in the series.

Question 1: Where do we seek guidance for living faithfully?

Read the sections “Introduction” and “Starting point: What we seek in Scripture.”

Exploration questions:

- What does the *Book of Order* say we seek as we turn to Scripture?
- What helps you find the guidance we seek as we turn to Scripture?
- What difference does it make that in our denomination’s Constitution we affirm that this is where we look for guidance as we seek to live faithfully?

Question 2: What does Matthew 25:31–46 say about how to live faithfully?

Read the sections “Are the three foci of the Matthew 25 Vision truly grounded in the text of Matthew 25?” and “Is this list complete? A test case: Jesus’ ministry.”

Exploration questions:

- What are the six forms of need and forms of care that the Judge considers?
- Who has these needs, and who provides care for them?
- In his ministry, what does Jesus do in addition to the six forms of care? Which do we not see him doing?
- What does “the least of these” mean? Who decides who is “the least of these”?

Question 3: If Matthew 25:31–46 does not list everything we are to do to be faithful, how do these verses guide us?

Read the section “Then how are we to live in ways faithful to the guidance offered to us in Matthew 25:31–46?”

Exploration questions:

- What do we draw on to listen for God’s guidance when Matthew 25:31–46 doesn’t tell us everything we need to know to live faithfully?
- What is discernment?
- How does discernment help us live faithfully?

Question 4: What guidance does discernment help us recognize in Matthew 25:31–46?

Read the section “What do we learn when we apply discernment to find guidance in Matthew 25:31–46?”

Exploration questions:

- How do the *Book of Confessions* and the *Book of Order* help us discern what God is calling us to do?
- What do the three paragraphs from the *Book of Confessions* help you recognize in Matthew 25:31–46?

Concluding

Read the section “The Matthew 25 Vision brings the guidance of Matthew 25:31–46 into focus for our present moment.”

Exploration questions:

- How are the three foci of the Matthew 25 Vision grounded in Matthew 25:31–46?
- What new insight have you gained into Matthew 25:31–46 and the three foci of the Matthew 25 Vision?



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